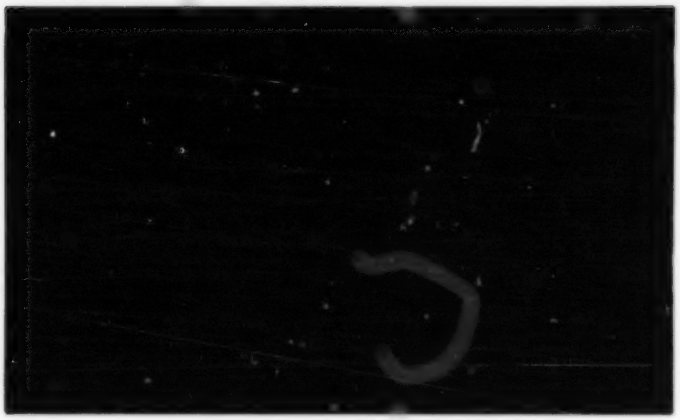
Nova Scotia
Advisory Council
on the Status of
Women

Conseil consultatif
sur la condition
féminine de la
Nouvelle-Écosse

An agency of the
Province of Nova Scotia



SUBMISSION TO

THE ROYAL COMMISSION ON

ELECTORAL REFORM AND PARTY FINANCING

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Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women
P.O. Box 745, Halifax, Nova Scotia B3J 2T3
(902) 424-8662

INTRODUCTION

The Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women is an advisory body to the government of Nova Scotia and has over the past 13 years engaged in a wide range of activities to create an awareness of and to improve the status of women. The Advisory Council strives to promote the equality of women in all spheres of activity, both public and private. We are concerned with increasing women's access to, and involvement in, the political process, whether through voting, lobbying, or seeking political office.

Through hard work and determination, Canadian women won the right to vote in 1918. A year later, the federal government enacted legislation enabling women to be elected to the House of Commons; Agnes MacPhail won her seat in Parliament in 1921. However, it was not until the famous "Person's Case" of 1929, which made it possible for women to be appointed to the Senate, that women were legally granted full political freedom in Canada.

Nova Scotian women won the right to vote and to hold office in 1918; however, 42 years passed before a woman gained a seat in the House of Assembly, and Nova Scotians did not send a woman to the House of Commons until 1974.

Although women are becoming more politically involved and more successful, our involvement in politics is still far from equal to that of men. Women's experiences of politics are

generally quite different from men's, and our entry into political life is faced with many obstacles, ranging from the political party structure itself, to the nature of society, to the lack of financial resources and support systems. These obstacles exist at all levels of government for women. Clearly, this is an area where much work still needs to be done. Our recommendations are intended to bring us one small step closer to achieving the vital goal of equal participation of women in politics.

FINANCIAL BARRIERS

Women's financial status in or outside of political life is not equal to that of men. Today a woman who works full-time, year-round, makes approximately 65 cents for every dollar earned by a man. Women still feel the burden of their financial situation while participating in the political arena. In the case of a general election, candidates have three sources of funding: their own money, their party's, and private contributions.

Because of women's generally lower earnings, they are less able to raise the large sums of money crucial to party nomination. It is estimated that the average woman seeking a party nomination will have to put at least 40 percent of her disposable income toward her campaign. In addition to this, women who have children carry the added expense of child care.

Male candidates often have greater access to funds since they are given greater support in the political arena, and private citizens or corporations may be reluctant to support a female candidate.

In order to ensure that the political system becomes more accessible, it is imperative that fund-raising and spending be

strictly regulated. The Advisory Council recommends that there be a cap on both donations and expenditures during elections and leadership races, and further, that only those individuals who are eligible to vote in the election be permitted to make political donations.

The political process must belong to individuals rather than corporate sponsors or non-Canadian interests. Corporate donations do not necessarily conform to the political views of shareholders or employees of the company, and unfairly disadvantage women candidates since women are much less likely to receive such financial support. Political parties should have to raise funds solely from individuals who are eligible voters in any given election.

We recommend a maximum individual political donation of $3,000, a $2,000 maximum expenditure for a nomination meeting for election of candidates at the constituency level, and a ceiling of $250,000 for a federal leadership campaign.

In this age of fiscal restraint, budget cuts, and massive government debt, it is imperative that individual politicians and political parties spend less on attempting to get elected and more on the services necessary to maintain the unique social support system that is our Canadian heritage.

VOLUNTEER WORK

According to the Canada Elections Act, "election expenses" means "the commercial value of goods and services donated or provided, other than volunteer labour...." (Ch.E-2, p.3) and "volunteer labour" means "any service provided free of charge by a person outside of that person's working hours, but does not include a service provided by a person who is self-employed if the service is one that is normally sold or

otherwise charged for by that person" (Ch.E-2, p.10). The Advisory Council feels that unpaid volunteer work be assigned monetary value for the purposes of enumerating and recording political donations.

Party service is recognized as the most important factor influencing the selection of candidates in competitive ridings. Much of the work that women do is of a support nature. This means that very few women have the opportunity to gain the kind of experience that will qualify them in the eyes of the party as desirable candidates. Recording the "volunteer work" of women in election campaigns as a political donation is a first step in recognizing and valuing women's unpaid labour for what it is--political involvement.

THE RIGHT OF ALL CITIZENS TO VOTE

Presently, all citizens are accorded the right to vote at an election with some of the following exceptions: "every person undergoing punishment as an inmate in any penal institution for the commission of any offence; every person who is restrained of liberty of movement or deprived of the management of his property by reason of mental disease" (Ch.E-2, p.40).

There are two serious problems to this approach of limiting voting rights. Firstly, we are becoming increasingly aware of the complex circumstances which lead individuals to commit criminal offenses, or that are associated with the causation of mental illness or disability. Many incarcerants share a history of family violence and child abuse, poverty, alcohol or drug addiction, and subsequent lack of motivation, direction, and resources. Such individuals should not be penalized further by being denied the right to vote. Indeed, enabling them to make political choices and to vote may be

important steps in the recognition and activation of individual decision-making.

Secondly, criminal offenses have not been committed by only those who are serving sentences in penal institutions, and "mental disease" does not occur only among those who have been institutionalized or otherwise certified insane or of unsound mind. This limitation discriminates against those who have been incarcerated; in other words, those who are being punished or who are receiving treatment may not vote, while those who are not may. It would be impossible and unethical to attempt to determine "fitness" to vote in the general population; the Advisory Council maintains it is equally problematic to determine such fitness among incarcerated individuals. We recommend that these limitations be removed from the Canada Elections Act.

ADVANCE POLLS AND PROXY VOTING

Many older people, and others who may have limited mobility, encounter difficulties in getting to the polling station on election day. Many Canadians experience confusion concerning whether they are qualified to vote at an advance poll or to vote by proxy, particularly in regard to the time constraints for notifying the appropriate individuals of their intent. The Council recommends that more extensive advertising be undertaken to clarify these options, with a view to increasing the political participation of house-bound or institutionalized Canadians.

GENERIC LANGUAGE

The Advisory Council recommends that the Canada Elections Act, and all other Acts under the mandate of this Royal Commission be revised to include non-sexist or gender-neutral

terminology. Where "he" or "his" is used exclusively to denote candidates, members, election officers, and voters, we suggest "he or she" and "his or hers" , or "them" and "their". Linguistic sexism excludes women from full participation in the political process by disallowing us to see ourselves as candidates, members, elections officers, and voters within the context of the Act.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

The Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women recommends that:

a) there be a cap on both donations and expenditures during elections and leadership races, and further, that only those individuals who are eligible to vote in the election be permitted to make political donations;

b) unpaid volunteer work be assigned monetary value for the purposes of enumerating and recording political donations;

c) the limitations on the rights of individuals serving time in penal and mental institutions be removed from the Canada Elections Act;

d) more extensive advertising be undertaken to clarify the options of advance and proxy voting; and

e) the Canada Elections Act, and all other Acts under the mandate of this Royal Commission be revised to include non-sexist or gender-neutral terminology.